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## THE AID OF CRITICISM IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS.

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THE overpowering force of the arguments of modern Old Testament criticism has compelled many to give up the traditional view of that volume, and, to a greater or less degree, to acknowledge the correctness of the results of these scientific researches. Such persons will doubtless have observed that the various results of these researches have made varying impressions upon them—sometimes agreeable, sometimes quite disagreeable. Among the results that bring a certain sense of relief must be mentioned, before all others, the recognition of the fact that the historical books of the Old Testament are composed from various sources and of various layers; for this frees us with one stroke from the annoying efforts at harmonizing, which are at times flat and rationalistic, and at times, according to their own claims, deep and keen. Still more thankfully can we recognize the fact that some prophetic passages—as, for example, Isaiah, chaps. 40–55—now for the first time stand out in their full glory, after their date has been correctly determined. On the other hand, we must number among the results that have a painful effect the knowledge that the text of the prophetic books in our hands is not always in its original condition, but has been wrought over and filled out. We may have ever so little sympathy for these anatomical studies, as Reuss sarcastically called them, but, nevertheless, there are cases in which, beyond doubt, there is such working over of texts and such interpolations (for example, Hos. 2:1 ff.; Jeremiah, chap. 3) that it is not possible to reject blankly all such criticism. Yet we have, at the same time, the disagreeable feeling that we are gradually losing a secure foundation for our text, and that in our proof texts we are constantly in danger of quoting a passage whose genuineness is already doubted or soon will meet that fate.

In no department, however, do the enriching and furthering fruits of criticism show themselves to such an extent and with such clearness as in the interpretation of the Psalms. Here the church has every reason to be thankful for recent researches, for they have made the religious content of these songs much more clear, and have made it much more easy for us to apply them to ourselves devotionally than was the case before. We see here the peculiar phenomenon that Hengstenberg's conception is essentially recognized and confirmed by modern criticism. In contrast to the historical exegesis of the single songs which Ewald called for and which Hitzig carried out almost by way of parody, Hengstenberg found in all psalms only "the ideal just man" introduced or described as speaking. Modern critics formulate it differently by calling the "I" of the Psalms a personification of the congregation of the pious, or a pious man who speaks in the name of all the pious; but the thing is essentially the same. Of course, Hengstenberg's view was a total impossibility so long as people followed his example in insisting upon the Davidic authorship of the Psalms, and the critical school of that day was perfectly right in demanding a concrete historical explanation of such psalms as had their origin at the time of David or in the period of the earlier kings. But when scholars resolved to bring down certainly the great majority of the psalms to the period beginning with Jeremiah, this difficulty was obviated, and the foundation was laid for a true and deep conception of the religious songs of Israel. The great advantages of this conception can be appreciated only by those who have plagued themselves with the endeavor to combine the religious significance of the Psalms with some historical explanation of their origin. Is it not most delightful to be freed at one stroke from purely personal enmities and strifes as the occasion for the Psalms? The foes of the psalmist are enemies of faith and of the law, and the hostile feeling is, therefore, a just thing. Saul, on the contrary, to whose persecutions the traditional titles often point, was a man mentally ill, whose battles for his people claim our sympathy, and whose tragic death awakens our pity. And Absalom had, we must confess, a disagreeably egotistical disposition; but

David himself was not at all without blame for the false development of his (Absalom's) character. And how unworthy, and even offensive, are many of the relations spoken of in the Psalms, if we insist upon bringing them into connection with David! After his great sin against Uriah and Bathsheba, how could he declare: "Only against God (and not against men) have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4)? Whereas these words are altogether true if they refer to ill-treatment which the heathen nations inflicted upon the Israelites, without any provocation on their part, and which Israel in these psalms, nevertheless, owns as a just divine punishment. How pointless the two last verses of this psalm are, if they are to be referred to David's building projects! How the sixteenth and thirtieth psalms lose value, if they are to be attributed to an illness of David, which prevented him from moving into his newly built palace, as even Delitzsch supposed—to say nothing of Hitzig's supposition that Ps. 16 was written when David sent to the chiefs of families in Judah the booty which, after Yahweh's counsel (vs. 7!), he had secured by plunder from the Amalekites! Such examples show that the critical results in this sphere mean, not merely a scientific, but also a religious gain, for which Christians cannot be thankful enough.

This is the fundamental position from which proceed the following small contributions to the consideration of single psalms, in so far as they aim to prove by single examples how much clearer and deeper the Psalms become, if they are brought into connection with the thoughts and the feelings of the later Israelites.

*Psalm 8.*—The thing that strikes us first in this psalm, and which has so much busied the exegetes of the church, is its application in the New Testament. If the poet has simply made the position of man in the world the object of his contemplation, how can, then, the author of Hebrews come to suppose that Christ is mentioned in this psalm? This question becomes the more urgent, if we bring Christ's own designation of himself, "Son of Man," into close connection with the eighth psalm. Was it not an unparalleled lack of taste to find christological thoughts in a

psalm which speaks of the rule of man over sheep and cows, birds and fishes? We only need to read the presentations of the exegetes of the church to see that here, in fact, there is, as Calvin puts it, a knot that is hard to loosen. Calvin himself seeks the solution in the fact that Christ was the *humani generis instaurator*, so that the restoration of human glory and power, lost through sin, became possible only by Christ's coming forward as a man, and by his letting this psalm apply to himself. But this explanation, which was renewed by Hengstenberg, is refuted by the fact that such subtle ideas are totally foreign to the New Testament, and especially to the author of Hebrews, for which reason, also, Hengstenberg consistently thrusts aside the use of the psalm by this author as a "homiletical application."

Yet, the difficulty lies not only in the New Testament application of this psalm, but just as much in the psalm itself. Apparently the psalm suffers from a painful lack of connection. It begins with a glorification of the God of Israel in the national sense ("our Lord"); and this is no secondary thought, as we see from the fact that this beginning is heard again at the end of the psalm. Hereupon follows, then, a very remarkable sentence, in which we read that Israel's God created for himself out of the mouth of babes and sucklings a defense that is able to bring opponents to silence. Then suddenly comes the account of the glory of the heavenly bodies and, as a contrast to them, of man, to whom, in spite of his insignificance, God has subjected all things. It is right, then, to ask here: If the poet only desired to express general religious reflections, how did he come upon the thought of emphasizing especially this point among the wonderful divine acts? Why did he not emphasize the other much greater miracles which are mentioned in Genesis, chap. I, and which have found so glorious an echo in Ps. 104? Some answer must be sought for, and this answer is, at the same time, as we shall see, of such a kind that it will solve the riddle lying in the New Testament application of the words.

We only need to let ourselves be guided by the fact that the poet at the beginning and at the end of the song emphasizes so

strongly the national thought. We may conclude from this that the thoughts which occupy him are not of a general and philosophical nature, but practical. His purpose is to strengthen himself and his fellow-Israelites in their faith touching Israel's task and future. In fact, it required a strong faith not to be led astray by the paradox which lay in the history of Israel. This little people was a plaything in the hands of the great powers of the world; it was unimportant and despised as few other nations were. And, nevertheless, the belief lived in it that it was called to assume a lordship over the rest of the world. After the oldest prophets had awakened this expectation (Gen. 27:29), it did not again disappear. It gave to itself only the more energetic expression, the more the external circumstances of the Israelites were adapted to make this hope appear to be foolishness. During the misery of the exile an enthusiastic prophet describes how foreigners are to build the walls of Jerusalem and kings are to serve the nation as its slaves (Isa. 60:10). And as Judaism after Antiochus Epiphanes seems to be near death, another prophet speaks of the nation of the saints, to whom the rule and power and might of the empires of the world are to be given (Dan. 7:27). With these comforters the poet of the eighth psalm associates himself. In order to strengthen the belief in the paradoxical destiny of Israel, he points to the parallels in the whole world, which everyone has before his eyes. In comparison with the imposing wonders of the heavens, we can think of nothing more unimportant and tiny than man, the dust-born mortal, as the book of Job particularly delights to present him; and, nevertheless, this being stands almost like a god in the rest of the world, as a monarch, to whom everything is made over! We cannot, of course, call the psalm an allegory, but a parallel, which is intended to confirm the one paradox by means of another which no one doubts. The despised and insulted Israel is to recognize itself in the son of man (that is, man) of the psalm, which was the more easy because Israel in another psalm (80:18) is directly called **אִישׁ** and **בֶּן אָדָם**. The intellectual contents of the psalm approach most closely the description of the servant of Yahweh, despised and neglected by all, by whom

nevertheless God intends to carry out such wonderful works (Isaiah, chap. 53).

The beauty of the psalm lies now precisely in the fact that this parallel is set up without a direct explanation. The contemporaries of the poet lived to such a degree in this realm of thought that an express *de te fabula narratur* was quite needless. The little psalm in its classical simplicity and certainty found an intelligent and joyful echo in its first readers without more definite explanation. It would be interesting if we could trace in the post-biblical literature of the Jews tokens of this conception of the song. So far as I know, this is not possible.<sup>1</sup> But the fact of the existence of such a conception is nevertheless proved precisely by the New Testament. If, as I am firmly convinced, the self-designation of Christ is founded on this psalm, the explanation for the fact lies in the circumstance that the paradox, which forms the fundamental essence of the history of Israel, comes forward in Christ in a new and more intense shape. The Son of Man has not where to lay his head, and yet all power is given to him, and yet the time will come when everything will own his sway. Jesus did not by this name designate himself as man in general, as Wellhausen thinks, but as the sign that finds opposition, as the one whose external appearance stands in paradoxal contradiction with his task and his future.

This conception of the psalm offers the explanation also for the third verse. It, too, expresses the thought that God's power is mighty in the weak. Numerous and strong foes

<sup>1</sup> In the Midrash Tehillim (Wünsche's translation, p. 80) the separate sentences are attributed to a series of Old Testament persons by means of all kinds of witty tricks: "What is man, that thou thinkest of him?" points to Abraham (Gen. 19: 29), and, "the son of man, that thou rememberest him?" points to Isaac (Gen. 21: 1); "thou makest him a little less than a god," points to Jacob, who determined the births of the goats according to his will; "with glory crownest thou him," points to Moses (Ex. 34: 29); "thou causest him to rule over the work of thy hands," points to Joshua (Jos. 10: 12 f.); "everything hast thou put under his feet," points to David; "sheep and oxen" points to Solomon (1 Kings 5: 13); "the wild beasts" points to Samson or to David; "the birds" points to Elijah (1 Kings 17: 6); "the fishes" points to Jonah; "what passes through the sea," points to the exodus of the Israelites. On the other hand, the unimportance of man is not referred to the external circumstances of the Israelites.

arise against God, but his power is so superior that the praise of little children, of the weakest among men, is in a position to put his foes to silence. It would match very well with our general conception of the psalm if we might seek for a figurative presentation in this verse. As is well known, there has been no lack of attempts of this kind. In the Middle Ages Rashi explained the babes and sucklings as Levites and priests. Later M. Geier found in them the unlearned and simple Christians (Matt. 11:25). And of late Smend has expressed the opinion that this verse can only be understood of the Jewish prayer. But to designate the Israelites as "sucklings" would be far too odd, especially when we consider the abundance of expressions for the suffering and poor pious Israelites which were at the service of the psalmist. For this reason it is doubtless better to hold fast to the natural sense of the verse, and only seek in it a poetically beautiful and bold expression for the fundamental thought of the song.

It is clear that the conception of the psalm here urged, which solves all difficulties simply and satisfactorily, is only possible when we give up every thought of a Davidic authorship, and when we connect the psalm with the time at which the pious with all their might struggled to hold fast to the belief in the rule of Israel over the world, in spite of the humiliating external conditions.

*Psalms 2 and 18.*—The second psalm presents to exegetes a very hard problem. Of course, we cannot think of a foreign king, but even the reference of the song to one of the Hasmonean kings is for several reasons improbability itself. The thought lies at hand that we should seek a pre-exilic king in the anointed of the Lord. But that is combated on the one hand by the language of the song, which is strongly Aramaic, and on the other hand by the absolute form in which the presentation meets us, a form which is severed from all definite and limited historical relations. If we finally try to find a firm footing in the purely Messianic explanation, we discover that that is just where the difficulties increase the most. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is the Messiah introduced as speaking,

whereas in this psalm the anointed himself speaks. Besides, we have the unmistakable impression that the psalm has a definite historical motive, and that, in spite of its absolute form, it moves in the sphere of a relative, historical time. This shows itself above all in the fact that the possibility is opened up to the heathen, by self-command and humility, of saving themselves from the judgment of God, whereas in all other absolutely eschatological figures the judgment that falls upon the heathen is unavoidable, and even their uprising is induced by God himself. Since, then, all these courses lead to no result, the only possible explanation seems to me to be the conception suggested by Beer,<sup>2</sup> according to which the anointed is no king, but the people Israel itself. That disposes of all difficulties. The psalm can now have arisen at a later, post-exilic time, as the language demands, and nevertheless can have as its motive real historic relations. And, although this conception at the first glance has the effect of a surprise, it still permits a completely satisfactory confirmation. The psalm joins on to the Old Testament passages in which the Davidic kingdom is transferred to the people as the heir, because the royal power itself was altogether destroyed; cf. Isaiah, chap. 55, and Ps. 89. The name "the anointed of Yahweh" stands in several passages, without doubt, for the whole people (Pss. 84: 10; 89: 39, 52; Hab. 3: 13), so that there is no difficulty even in this respect. But above all we gain by this means a parallel for another passage, in which, likewise, the ideal people speaks and tells of what the Lord said to it at the beginning of its existence. "Yahweh called me from the womb and said to me: No servant art thou, Israel, in whom I glorify myself!" Thus, in Isa. 49: 1 ff., the servant of Yahweh speaks quite in the same way as the anointed Ps. 2: 7.<sup>3</sup> If we examine the words more carefully, we find that here, again, the world-dominion is in question, which the Lord has promised to Israel, and which makes the present attempt of

<sup>2</sup> BEER, *Individual- und Gemeindepsalmen*, 1894, 2 f.

<sup>3</sup> Instead of the singular expression אֵלֶיָּחֹק HALÉVY, *Revue sémitique*, Vol. II, p. 216, proposes the reading מִרְחֹק: "a long time ago the Lord spoke to me." This reading is certainly worth consideration.

the heathen, to despise the Israelitic people, such a foolish undertaking. We see, then, that the two psalms, 8 and 2, which apparently are so totally different, really are closely related to each other when they are rightly understood. As for the situation which inspired the poet to write his song, we might conclude from the wording of vs. 3 that several heathen nations were then under the dominion of Israel and were thinking of freeing themselves from it. From this we then might argue as to the time of the writing of the psalm. That is, however, by no means certain. The occasion can also be an attempt of the heathen nations to attack Israel and to destroy it. In this case the bands from which the heathen wish to tear themselves loose might be the invisible bands with which the promises of the world-dominion of Israel bound the other nations to Israel. Such times occurred often enough in the post-exilic period.<sup>4</sup>

The case is the same with Ps. 18, as Cornill<sup>5</sup> and Coblenz<sup>6</sup> have rightly seen. That the Davidic authorship has been asserted with special energy in the case of this psalm is the consequence of the fact that the nation is here described with a conscious reference to David's example. But the emphasizing of the spotless purity of the speaker (vss. 21 ff.) proves of itself sufficiently that King David, who, in spite of all his nobility of soul, was by no means free from fault, cannot possibly speak here. Could David have mentioned the purity of his hands or his fulfilment of the commands of Yahwéh without his hand trembling? Then, too, the expression עַם כִּנִּי (vs. 28) betrays clearly the real sense of the psalm. Compare, further, the vow to praise God among the heathen (vs. 50). Such words fit best in the mouth of the people, which we here find in an ideal form and in Messianic array. In this psalm, also, we light upon Israel's expectation of a world-dominion: "Thou makest me the head of the heathen

<sup>4</sup>The conception which we here favor appears unconditionally preferable to Cheyne's view (*Origin of the Psalter*, p. 239), according to which a later poet in Ps. 2 feigns a Davidic situation.

<sup>5</sup>CORNILL, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, p. 120.

<sup>6</sup>COBLENZ, *Ueber das betende Ich der Psalmen*, 1897, pp. 34 ff.

nations ; nations that were here unknown serve me ; when they hear of me they obey me ; foreigners play the hypocrite before me " (vss. 44 ff.). In distinction from Ps. 2, this song betrays no definite historical motive. It is a purely ideal picture, over which the pious grow enthusiastic ; it breathes the air of the Messianic period, in which all the expectations of Israel are fulfilled, and the sufferings lay in the past. If we familiarize ourselves with this conception, we shall soon see that the psalm comes much nearer to us and gains much deeper content than if we consider it as the victorious song of a royal conqueror.

*Psalms 1, 19, and 94.*—The presupposition of the Psalms is everywhere the law that the Lord has given to his people. This law consists of a number of single commands, and lay before the poets in a written form. The Psalms agree with the older prophets in laying stress upon the moral and religious constituents of the law. And there are psalms which combat the external worship and offerings in a manner that reminds us precisely of the polemics of the older prophets. Yes, these psalms go still farther than the usual prophetic polemics, in that they designate as worthless, not only the offerings of the godless, but also the offerings in themselves, even those of the pious (see especially Ps. 40). But the ordinary attitude of the Psalms in this respect is different. In the law presupposed by the bards, the rules for worship formed an essential constituent, and claimed, therefore, respect ; on the other hand, such rules had externally no value for the deeper feelings of the pious. This contradiction is solved in the Psalms by the fact that they made the forms of worship the object of an allegorical and spiritual exposition. As symbols, these laws contained a wealth of religious thoughts from which the bards drew in rich measure. The thank-offerings and the votive offerings transmuted themselves into thanks and praise (22 : 26 ; 50 : 14, etc.) ; the rules for the Levitical purity of the persons who officiated at altars teach that the pious man must be holy and pure, if he desires to remain in the presence of God (26 : 6) ; and so forth.

This deepening of the law of worship is connected with the circumstance that the bards in the first place know the law as

an object of zealous and loving study. The law teaches not only what man should do; it is a spiritual world into which the pious man plunges, and in which he lives a far richer and more intense life than in the external world. Blessed is the man, the first psalm says, who meditates upon the law day and night—that is to say, who does not merely act according to it. He ever finds in this book new treasures; his joy and enthusiasm over it are ever greater, until he at last sings a hymn to the law, such as we read in Ps. 19:8 ff. This, too, is a clear feature of the later Judaism, for which the written law had become the basis of the Jewish life. The Psalms fill out the activity developed by the lawyers proper by winning for the law an infinitely deeper and more spiritual meaning. In view of the fearful pressure of the times under which the Israelites usually had to sigh, the Thora became for the pious a spiritual world full of wonderful harmony, into which they could take flight when the external world was about to drive them to despair. Here God's justice revealed itself in a transparent form, whereas they often sought it in vain in the historic reality. We meet this phase of the study of the law with quite especial clearness in Ps. 94. "Blessed is the man," it says here (vss. 12 f.), "whom thou instructest in thy law to give him rest in the face of the evil days, until a pit is dug for the godless;" that is, until at last the great judgment comes. The "rest" here, as the contents of the whole psalm show, can only be the spiritual rest which the pious man gains by plunging himself into the law, while the others fall a prey to temptations and lose their belief in a just God (vss. 8 ff.). It is a bath in which faith constantly renews its youth, the best gift of grace that the Lord has granted to his pious ones. If, then, the history of the post-exilic Judaism is to be written, the contribution that the Psalms give should not be overlooked; if we do not wish to give a one-sided picture of this time, we dare not forget that the law now found itself in the hands of sharp and hair-splitting lawyers.

*Psalm 15.*—The importance of this psalm lies in the fact that it teaches us the ideal of a genuine and correct Israelite, as he was pictured in the circles from which the psalms proceeded. It is

particularly instructive to compare the psalm with like ideals in other Old Testament writers. Ezekiel gives (18: 5 ff.) a picture of an upright Israelite. Precisely like Ps. 15, alongside of the general sentences, "do right, converse according to God's precepts," he emphasizes a few features which we may assume appeared to him to be especially weighty. These individual features are found in the prophets in the sphere of strict justice and in that of loving, beneficent charity, but also in that of Levitical purity in a more external sense (vs. 6). This point is completely lacking in the psalm, which only holds before the pious man a mirror of morals. On the other hand, we cannot deny that the ideal of the bard is somewhat prosaic, and that it therefore can stand no comparison with the noble and high-hearted picture that is portrayed in Job, chap. 31, and which belongs to the most beautiful passages of the Old Testament. The two descriptions, Isa. 33: 15 and Ps. 24: 4, stand about upon the same level as the representation of the fifteenth psalm.

Among the individual features which the poet of the fifteenth psalm especially emphasizes, two deserve particular notice: The pious honors, so says vs. 4, the god-fearing, but on the contrary he despises the sinners.<sup>7</sup> This warning lay close at hand at a time when the pious consisted chiefly of poor and lowly people, while the godless were mostly in possession of riches and worldly might (*cf.* Ps. 49). In comparison with Ezekiel, who demands only beneficent charity toward the poor, this is a very characteristic feature; compare, in the New Testament, Jas. 2: 2 ff. In the same verse we read that the genuinely pious man swears **לְהָרֵעַ** and does not change. Commonly people supply here: to (his own) injury; but in that case exactly the main thing would in a very singular way have remained unexpressed. Probably we have here an abbreviated form of speech (*cf.* a similar thing, Ps. 39: 3, where **מִטּוֹב** is probably as much as **מִטּוֹב עַד רָע**, that is, "all without exception"), so that we should have to supply, according to Lev. 5: 4, "for good or for bad;" that is, without considering the consequences of the oath. But if

<sup>7</sup>The two words **נִמְאָס** and **נִבְזָה** give the impression of being a duplicate; probably we should read in one place with the LXX **מִרָע**.

we explain it thus, the sentence contains a hard ethical problem. The sense of the passage quoted from the law appears to be the following: If anyone in haste and levity promises by an oath to do something, and then afterward regrets his oath because he had not counted up the consequences, he may designate his oath as a hasty act, but then he must also offer a guilt-offering because of the breaking of the holiness of the oath. If Jephtha then had known of this law, he could have changed the offering up of his daughter into a guilt-offering.<sup>8</sup> In the realm of the religious vow a similar reversal of the promise was, of course, not gladly seen, and the pious made it a point of honor to keep their oath, even at great personal cost. Furthermore, the author of the book of Ecclesiastes (5:3 ff.) warns: "Say not softly to the priest, it was in haste, for why wilt thou load God's wrath upon thee?" If we understand the words of the psalm in this same way, there is no difficulty in it. But it says here, not "vow" (נדר), but "swear," which might also occur in many other cases, and the remaining contents of the psalm make the thought of an oath sworn to a fellow-man certainly more likely here than that of a religious vow. But if we understand the psalm in this larger sense, the words are not at all free from question. What would be the case if, for example, the promise sworn were such as Herod's oath (Matt. 14:7 ff.)? Should the pious man keep even such an oath? The answer can only be that the poet did not in the least think of such cases, and therefore his words are not to be employed in any such inquiries.

<sup>8</sup> Mohammed also allows the withdrawal of a thoughtlessly sworn vow (Sur. 5:91; 66:2).